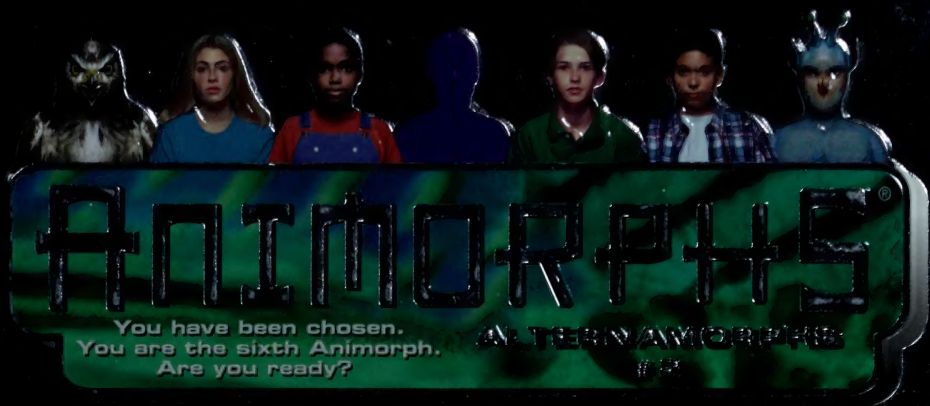




The Next Passage

K. A. Applegate



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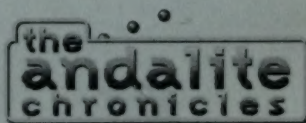
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The Hork-Bajir Chronicles
Visser

ALTERNAMORPHS

The First Journey



The Next Passage

K.A. Applegate

AN
APPLE
PAPERBACK

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For Michael and Jake

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INTRODUCTION

My name is Rachel.

Who am I?

Just a kid. A kid with divorced parents and two little sisters. I go to school, do my homework, hang out with my friends. If you saw me I bet you wouldn't look twice. Just another suburban mall rat.

Nothing special.

Funny how that sounds like an insult.

I bet you hate being ordinary. I bet you long for something to make you feel different and special. You're probably just waiting for something exciting to happen to you.

Be careful what you wish for.

One night something exciting did happen to me. I was given a weapon. A wonderful and awful weapon. The ability to morph, to change from an average kid into an animal. Into a bird or insect.

Only five human beings possess this weapon. Me; Cassie, my best friend; Jake, my cousin and our leader; Marco, our own personal clown; and Tobias, our lost soul. Five humans unique in all the universe. Guess that makes us pretty special.

But along with the power to morph came a mission: Save the world. I'm not kidding. This is no joke.

See, Earth is being invaded by the Yeerks, aliens with weak, repulsive bodies. Slugs. Parasites.

The Yeerks want our human bodies. Our strong legs and hands. Our sensitive ears, mouths, and eyes. They are taking over human hosts, entering their brains, controlling them, rendering them utterly helpless.

So we fight. The five of us humans and Ax, an alien kid. An Andalite. The Andalites battle the Yeerks throughout the galaxy. A war on too many fronts. One day the Andalites may send reinforcements to Earth. Until then, we fight alone.

Each battle changes us. Transforms us on the inside as much as on the outside.

War is not a video game. In a real war, you make desperate decisions and deal with desperate consequences. You spill blood and your blood gets spilled. You brush up against death. You

change. You're warped until ever being average and ordinary again is an impossible dream.

What would you do if you were given the chance to be different, unique, extraordinary? If someone offered you the ability to morph, would you take it? And if you did take it, how long do you think you would survive?

This is your chance to find out.

But I'm warning you. Think about it first. Think deeply. Ask yourself: Can you handle it?

CHAPTER 1

The new kid.

You know the part.

Played it half a dozen times.

Your first day at a new school, the kids give you curious glances. A few say hi. Most don't. A concerned teacher assigns some suck-up to show you around. Help you find the cafeteria and the bathrooms.

The only kids paying attention to you are the ones you wish would leave you alone. Losers. Too friendly types. The normal ones are too busy with their lives to worry about some new kid.

Lunch. You eat it alone at the corner of some cafeteria table.

You can't wait to get out of there. To get off

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somewhere by yourself and blow off some steam. The final bell is salvation. You head out on foot, exploring your new town.

Not so different from the last one. Dunkin' Donuts. Burger King. Wal-Mart. Home Depot. A mall with the usual stuff inside: Mrs. Fields, The Gap, Express.

You don't want to go in there. Don't want to face another crowd of strange faces. Instead you dodge traffic and head into an abandoned construction site.

On one end, a highway. Bands of trees on either side. On the far end, a broad field. A deserted place. A ghost town. A great place to be alone.

You kick around for ten minutes. Exploring. Checking out the big piles of rusted steel beams. Pyramids of concrete pipes. Deep pits filled with black, muddy water. A pile of gravel. Rocks the size of a Reese's cup.

You pick one up and let fly.

THWONK!

The rock hits the concrete block with a satisfying noise. After a couple dozen throws your aim even starts to improve.

THWONK!

THWONK!

THWONK!

You land three rocks in a row right on the same spot in the concrete. When the third hits, the concrete crumbles. Weird. That stuff is usually pretty strong.

Whatever. Time to head home. Dinner with Mom and Dad. Homework. Then the same grind tomorrow.

Maybe tomorrow someone will talk to you.

You're heading out of the lot when you see it. A small box nestled down inside the concrete block that fell apart. Sky-blue. Very plain. Small. Maybe five inches to each side.

Something about it draws you closer.

You glance over your shoulder before you yank it out of the block. The box feels heavy for its size. You feel something when you pick it up. Something like an electric charge. Only it's not painful.

You hold the thing up to the fading light. There's writing on it. Not English or any language you recognize. Maybe it's Greek or Egyptian.

You slip the box into your book bag. The thing looks valuable. You wonder how much you can get for it on the Internet. As soon as you get home, before dinner even, you post a few messages.

The blue box is available to the highest bidder.

CHAPTER 2

Day Two at the new school.

Some guy named Marco insists on eating lunch with you. Not much better than eating alone.

You can't wait to get home. That morning, there was already an answer to the "for sale" notices you posted on the Internet. A guy says he wants to see the box. Says he'll pay good money.

You wrote him an E-mail. Set the timer on the computer so that he'd get your address right before you got home.

Last period. You rush out of the building. Get home early and do your business.

One problem: You're in the door about two seconds when you know something is wrong.

Your dad is home early. You can hear him talking to someone upstairs. And it doesn't sound good.

You take the stairs two at a time. Bound into your room. Your dad is standing feet wide, pointing his service revolver at —

Something.

Something about the size of a retriever with eight stumpy legs, blue-and-tan fur, a scorpion tail, and two arms. The thing is alive. Growing and changing right before your eyes.

"Whoa!" you say.

"Some kind of alien," your father explains.

"An alien, no way!"

<Yes, way!>

You freeze, amazed. The voice is coming from inside your head! What's even weirder: It sounds vaguely familiar.

<Listen to me,> the voice continues. <Things are about to get really ugly around here. The two of you need to hide.>

"Hide? Why do we have to hide?!" you demand.

<Because the alternative is to be dead.>

Dingdong!

The doorbell is ringing.

Your father doesn't flinch. He's military trained. He still has the gun on the — the *thing*. It has stopped growing and changing. Now it re-

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sembles a blue-and-tan deer with a wicked scorpion tail. That tail is definitely a weapon.

Idiotically, you're wondering if the door is for you. Could be the buyer for the blue box. Then —

BLAM! BLAM!

Your father is shooting! At what?

Fwapp!

The alien swings his tail! The gun goes flying. So does one of your father's fingers.

"Hey!" you cry.

"Ahhh!" your father yells.

CRRRRUNCH!

Downstairs the door explodes in splinters. There is a severe, house-shaking pounding as many large feet run up the stairs.

Your knees are rubber. Your bowels jelly.

You and your father stare as two creatures leap into the room.

They have feet like a T-rex. Necks like snakes. Large birdlike beaks. Three daggerlike horns protruding out of their foreheads. Bent-back legs and very long arms. A curved horn blade on each wrist and elbow. More blades poking out of knees and off the ends of tails. They remind you of the monsters from *Where the Wild Things Are*.

"Uh. Wh-what are they?"

<I told you to hide!> says the voice in your head.

The Wild Things are joined by another blue-deer alien. Something about him sends a chill up your spine. Somehow you know he is dangerous.

"Get out of here!" you yell.

<Get out of here?> the blue-deer alien says. <Why, you've hurt my feelings. I just received your primitive transmission and I rushed right over.>

"Y-y-you want to b-b-buy the blue box?" you stammer.

<Oh, yes, definitely,> the alien says. <I do, I do. And I'm willing to pay anything. Let's see, what could I offer you for the box? I know!> He whips his tail and presses the blade against your father's throat. <I'll pay you your father's life.>

CHAPTER 3

4
<You are not getting the box,> says the other blue-deer alien.

You're confused. You just assumed all of the blue-deer aliens were working together.

<Then this human will be separated from his head. I understand that's usually fatal in humans.>

Sudden movement!

Your father jerks his head back, away from the alien's tail blade.

You run straight at the alien, yelling, "Let him go!"

FWAPP!

FWAPP!

The two deer-aliens are fighting with their tails. The Wild Things move forward. Blades flash.

Your posters fly, your curtains tear, your books scatter.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

Your father is in the corner, firing his gun with his left hand. He usually can't even hold a fork in that hand. But three circles appear in a Wild Thing's chest. Down he goes.

Then —

"Hhhhrrooooarrhh!" A throaty roar.

You turn to look.

An enormous grizzly bear is coming through your bedroom door! And behind the bear is a huge orange-and-black tiger.

You're crying and laughing all at once. This is insane! You wonder if you're going nuts.

Suddenly you gag. Heave. You're going to be sick. Maybe it's fear. But you're *definitely* freaking out. You turn your back on the wild, insane violence and run for the toilet.

You're just kneeling down on the tile when —
CRASH!

One of the Wild Things comes through the wall like a load of bricks. He leaps up, shakes himself off, and hops through the wall to rejoin the fight.

Forget throwing up. Time to listen to the voice in your head and hide. You climb into the bathtub and cower. The wall between the bathroom

and bedroom is reduced to smashed two-by-fours and torn Sheetrock. You can see glimpses of the battle raging in your bedroom.

Your father crawls in. He wedges himself between the tub and the toilet. He follows the action in the next room, wildly pointing his gun here, there.

One of the deer-aliens begin to change. His skin and fur turn purple. His shoulders bulk out. Two legs shrivel and disappear. The others grow bigger and stronger. Four arms sprout, two from each shoulder. The arms are wrinkly down in the place where the hands should be. And instead of hands there are bony red points.

FwoooooooOOOMPH!

The wrinkled skin at the bottom of the arm zooms right out like a rocket! The cone hits the remaining deer-alien and knocks him to his knees. Instantly, the cone hand retracts and wrinkles up, ready to fire again.

<Now, let's make this simple,> comes a commanding voice in your head. <I want the blue box. I will have the blue box. Or all of you will die.>

You scramble to your feet. The box is in your backpack. "Fine!" you shout. "I'll give you the box. Just leave us alone!"

<No!> Another voice in your head. You have

no idea where the voice is coming from, but you know this message is meant for you.

<Listen to me,> the new voice says urgently. <I'm on your side! We can get you out of here alive. But whatever you do, don't give up that box.>

What do you do? If you turn over the box, go to chapter 4. If you refuse, go to chapter 5.

CHAPTER 4

You ignore the pleading voice in your head. You whip the blue box out of your backpack. "Here!" you say, trying to be brave. "Take it."

<Get it!> the commanding voice booms.

One of the Wild Things yanks the box out of your hand.

"Now leave!" you shout.

<Ha! Ha! Ha! These humans are such charming fools. Bring them as well!>

Another Wild Thing grabs you, practically yanking your arm out of the socket. Roughly pulls you toward the door. You make yourself heavy, try to resist. But the Wild Thing just picks you up like a sack of flour. It's like trying to fight with a polar bear.

"No! Let me go or I'll kill you!" It's your father. He's being dragged down the stairs behind you. A Wild Thing on each side, picking him up under the arms.

Through the living room and out into the kitchen. Out the back door and straight into the back of a moving van.

The Wild Things toss you down in the back of the van. Your father lands next to you.

Then —

Screaming outside. Your mother! When did she get home? She's crying and begging to be set free. A Wild Thing drags her inside, tosses her down next to your father.

She looks wild, terrified. "What's happening?!"

"We've all lost our minds," your father answers.

"What happened to your hand?" Your mother starts to wrap your father's wound with a piece of cloth she ripped from the bottom of her blouse.

You feel the van's motor roar to life. You're moving!

"Where are you taking us?" you demand.

The Wild Things don't respond.

You twist around. A human is driving the van! You can see him through a small glass partition. You bang on the glass. "Help us! Help us!"

The driver doesn't turn around, but you can hear him laughing.

Minutes later, you stop at a warehouse.

The Wild Things roughly drag you inside. You struggle, but you can't break free. Your mother and father are right behind you. Coming quietly now.

The warehouse is empty except for a few old cars. In the center of the concrete floor is a circular metal staircase, leading down.

You hear noises. A deep sloshing, swooshing sound. Screams, terrified cries, shouts.

The Wild Things drag you down and down until you must be ten stories underground. A strange smell tickles your nose. It's almost like . . . dust or lightning.

You emerge in an immense cavern. In the very center is a pool, like a small lake. The water inside moves like mercury. The surface of the liquid ripples and splashes. Something is under the water!

"Barracudas," your father says.

You laugh. "What is this? A movie set?"

Your guard stops at the end of a low steel pier stretched out over the water. Your parents' guards head off to the right. Your mother is sobbing. Your father is struggling and cursing.

"Don't worry!" your mother shouts.

"We're going to get out of this!" your father shouts.

"Hey — where are you taking them?" you holler. "Stop! You can't do that!"

You're crying, too. Now you notice the cages lining the edge of the pool. The cages are full of people! Men and women and children. They seem hopeless, beaten down. Most of them are just staring off into space.

One of the guards opens a door and roughly shoves your parents in with the others.

"Mom! Dad!" you holler.

Now the guard is dragging you down the pier. You kick and scream. You have no idea what's going to happen but you know it's probably not good.

At the end of the pier, the Wild Thing pushes you down. It twists your head. Forces your ear under the molten liquid.

Then you feel it.

Something tickling your ear. Something pushing and probing into your ear canal.

"NOOOOO!" you yell.

Out of the corner of your eye, you can see it. Something gray and slimy. Like the world's biggest slug. And it's crawling out of the sludge and into your ear!

The pain is incredible.

Worse than anything you've ever imagined.

The Wild Things haul you to your feet and let go. You want to run. To flee. To help your parents. But you can't move your legs. Can't control your eyes.

What is happening? you wonder.

To your surprise, someone answers. <You are my host now.>

Suddenly, without wanting to, you are walking calmly down the pier. You want to see what's happening to your parents, but your eyes won't move in the direction of the cages.

<Forget them,> says the voice in your head.

<No! Never!> you yell. Then — <Who are you?>

<Don't you know? I'm the Yeerk in your head. I've settled down into the crevices of your brain. I control your body now.>

<H — How?> you demand.

The voice is your head laughs. <You tried to bargain with Visser Three! What a fool! You're a slave now. A slave forever. And your parents will share the same fate. Hahaha! Hahahahaha!>

What were you thinking? Go back to page 11 and try again.

CHAPTER 5

“No!” you say defiantly. “The box is mine.”
<Attack!> says an awful commanding voice in your head.

“No, wait!” you say.

But it’s too late. The terrible purple nightmare monster, the Wild Things, the deer-alien, the bear, the tiger are all focusing on you.

You back against the tile wall, getting as far away from them as possible.

The grizzly moves first. It bellows, lowers its head, lands on all fours, and runs straight at you. Like a runaway train. Behind the grizzly, like heat-seeking missiles, come two massive cone hands. They’re heading straight for you.

You close your eyes.

But you can't close your ears.

WHUM-WHUMPH! WHAM! CRUNCH!

You open your eyes. The cone hands missed!

Yes!

Then —

WHOMP!

A mountain of bear sweeps you up and shoves you through the shattered plaster and glass. For one stunned second you are flying. You can see the evening sky. A tree branch. You windmill your arms. Then —

WHAM!

The air explodes from your lungs as you hit the ground. Your spine crunches. Teeth slam together. You fall backward and your head hits the ground.

WUMP!

Blackness.

You wake up amidst the smells of hay, medicine, and animal poop. You're surrounded. Five kids standing around you in a circle. Solemn, tired-looking kids. One of them looks familiar.

"You're Marco," you say with a little laugh. "We had lunch together today."

Marco nods and gives you a little wave. The others introduce themselves. Jake. Cassie. Rachel. Ax.

They explain about the Yeerks, about the invasion. You learn some vocabulary. The Wild

Things are called Hork-Bajir. The deer-aliens are Andalites.

"What about my mom and dad?" you ask.

Marco walks over and stands right in front of you. "Your parents have been taken to a secret underground facility called a Yeerk pool. Picture a sludgy, cesspool of a pond the color of molten lead. Hork-Bajir warriors will drag your parents out to the end of a pier. They will —"

"Marco!" Cassie says angrily.

"They will drag them out to the end of that pier and they will kick their legs out from under them and force their heads down into the sludge. . . ."

You stare as Marco drones on. His words stab you in the gut. You don't absorb it all. But you understand your parents are slaves. Slaves of the saddest sort.

An intense anger hits you. A desire to strike back, to send these Yeerks back to wherever they came from. You want to save your parents. You have to.

"It's too late to help your parents," Jake says quietly. "And as of now, you have no home and you can't go back to school. You do, and the Yeerks will find you. And it'll be you taking that long walk down the steel pier."

Your mind can't grasp it. You try to argue, to

convince yourself it's just a trick. But they prove it to you. Ax, a disturbingly pretty boy, turns into an even more disturbing-looking alien. What you now know is an Andalite.

"There is one nice thing about all this," Cassie says. "There is a compensation for all the danger and all the fear. Any animal you can touch, you can *become*. A dolphin, a skunk, a wolf."

"An elephant or a grizzly bear," Rachel says.

"A gorilla. A shark," Marco says.

"A tiger, a fly, a cockroach," Jake says. "Any animal. Any size. But only for two hours at a time. You can never stay in morph for more than two hours."

"Why?" you wonder.

And then you meet Tobias. He was trapped in his red-tailed hawk morph. Now, he lives his life as a bird of prey.

They give you a few hours to think about it. You take a walk in the woods behind Cassie's farm. You try to think, but your mind refuses to track. Your jaw hurts, your back aches. You keep thinking about your parents.

Unreal. Your whole world shattered, ruined. You feel hopeless as you head back to the barn. The others are waiting for you.

"I'm ready," you say.

Someone produces the box. *Your* box. The box that destroyed your life. They toss it to the alien.

<Press your hand on the square nearest to you,> he tells you.

You step forward and press your hand down on the cube.

"It tingles," you say.

<You may remove your hand now,> the alien says.

You do, thinking that the experiment has failed. You don't feel any different. The others are guarded, but they smile and shake your hand.

"I want to try it," you say.

Cassie leads you into a horse stall. "Put your hand on his neck," she tells you.

The horse turns and gives you a surprised look. Then he ignores you, going back to eating his hay. His fur feels rough and warm.

"Focus your mind," Cassie says. "See the horse in your imagination. Think about him, what he is, what he represents."

You close your eyes, concentrate.

"Now take your hand away," Cassie says softly. "You have the horse inside you. His DNA is in your blood. You can *become* him. Try it."

This is ridiculous, you think.

But you have to be sure. You close your eyes. Imagine the horse.

Nothing happens. All you feel is a little itching, a distant sensation in your legs.

"HrrrEEE-hee-hee-hee!"

Your eyes jolt open. The horse is panicking. Rearing up, nickering just a foot away.

When you look down, you understand why.

Your chest, your hands are covered with sleek brown fur. You can see your hair flowing around your waist, but it doesn't look like your hair. It looks like a horse's mane.

"Aggggghhhh!" you scream.

"HrrrEEE-hee-hee-hee Hrrr-EEEEEE-heee-heee-he!"

"Watch out!" Rachel says. She pulls you out of the stall, away from the panicked horse.

You stumble back blindly, mesmerized by the sight of your feet exploding out of your shoes. Growing, rounding, turning into hooves.

Your body is getting longer, heavier.

WHUMP! You fall forward onto all fours.

The horse's mind creeps in. It's nervous, frightened. But not as frightened as your own true mind.

Cassie leads you out into the pasture. It's gray, raining. But the fresh air quiets the horse's mind. Without thinking you begin to run.

Amazing! You feel strength flowing through your legs, your back. More power than you have

ever known! You run until your coat is sleek with sweat and rain. Until your slender legs tremble with exhaustion.

Your anger over your parents gives you an intense adrenaline rush.

"That's enough!" Cassie yells. "Don't let the morph control you. You can't forget your two-hour limit."

Suddenly you have a new fear. How will you ever undo these changes? Will you ever be human again? You walk back into the barn and focus on your own body. You almost cry with relief when the changes begin.

The others are waiting, watching you curiously.

"How was it?" Rachel asks.

"Fun," you admit.

Cassie smiles at you.

"Morphing isn't a game," Jake says darkly.

"No," you agree. "It's a weapon. And I'm ready to fight the Yeerks."

CHAPTER 6

The pleasure fades out of Cassie's face. "A weapon. Yeah, I guess that's what morphing is for us."

"A weapon we can share now that we have the blue box," Jake points out.

You feel their attention slip, shift, and lock on this new topic. They debate using the blue box to make an army of Animorphs. You try to follow. But it's like when your parents talk politics or discuss the stock market. You don't really know enough to have an opinion and nobody asks what you think.

Jake, Rachel, Marco, and Cassie do most of the talking. Ax offers an occasional opinion. Tobias is mostly silent. He's in his red-tailed hawk

form, up in the rafters. Even though he doesn't say much, you somehow never forget he's there.

You feel left out. The six of them — they're obviously a tight group. You suddenly hope the others use the blue box again and again. Then you won't be the only outsider.

The rain is plinking on the barn roof and the animals are rattling in their cages and Tobias is preening and Rachel's voice is rising as she argues a point and Marco is rolling his eyes at her when —

It all stops.

All of it.

Every sound. Silence.

The rain. Silence.

The Animorphs in their debating poses. Frozen.

The barn full of animals. Stopped dead.

Frozen. Still. Motionless. Everything and everyone.

Except for you.

You look up at Tobias. He has one talon off the rafter, wings half-open for stability. Frozen in an impossible pose.

Slowly, cautiously, you move to the door.

Raindrops hover in the air.

You're frightened, amazed. It's as if the whole world were a video and someone hit the "pause" button.

You feel small and powerless and terribly alone. Somehow . . . forgotten. You have an overwhelming desire to stand still, to blend in with the frozen world.

A raccoon stands up on its hind legs. You jump about two feet. Especially when the raccoon walks *through* its wire cage. Simply passes through the bars like they're air.

The raccoon lumbers up to you, and puts one black-and-white paw on your knee. He looks into your eyes and says <I am the Ellimist.>

"Are — are you an alien?" you ask.

<In a manner of speaking.>

"Did you stop . . . everything?" you ask.

<Yes.>

"How?" you ask.

<From your perspective, I am an all-powerful being. Human perspective however, is extremely limited.>

"You stopped the rain?"

<Yes.>

You relax a hair. Almost. This, this Ellimist — *whatever* that is — doesn't seem to mean you any harm.

"Why?" you ask.

BECAUSE YOU'VE ANGERED ME!

You feel a chill crawl through your body as the sunlight blinks out. You are in total darkness.

Floating in a featureless void. No up. No down. And the Ellimist's voice comes from everywhere at once. And from nowhere.

"I — I'm sorry," you stutter. "Wh-what did I do?"

YOU HAVE ALTERED THE STRANDS OF SPACE-TIME.

"But I don't even know what space-time is," you protest. Then —

You see it. It blinks on like a ride in a carnival.

Threads. Hundreds, thousands of them in all the brilliant colors of the spectrum. Running in every direction around you. Threads streaking off into the distance, curling back inside themselves, disappearing, reappearing, twisting, unraveling, and braiding. A chaos of complication. And they are changing all of the time. Moving. Growing brighter or dimmer.

You can't make sense of it.

No matter. It is beautiful.

"Is something bad going to happen because of me?" you ask.

THAT DEPENDS.

"Depends? Depends on what?"

YOUR WORTH. YOU WILL TAKE A TEST TO MEASURE YOUR WORTH.

"What kind of test?" you ask, trying to sound strong.

DO WELL AND I WILL SAVE YOUR FAMILY FROM THE YEERKS. DO POORLY AND YOU WILL DIE.

"What kind of test?" you ask again.

The threads disappear. The darkness disappears. Now you are floating in a plain white void.

CHOOSE.

You look down. In your hand is a remote control with two round buttons. One is marked A. The other is marked B.

If you push button A, go to chapter 7. If you push button B, go to chapter 18.

CHAPTER 7

The white void is gone.

You are surrounded by color! Primary colors everywhere! Red, blue, yellow. Wherever you are, the place seems to have been built of brilliantly colored blocks like Legos.

Coming straight at you is a gaggle of aliens!

Ugly aliens. Heads thrust forward on long necks. Triangular faces with the point toward the top. Pink eyes stuck on short stalks. Gaping mouths with fat blue tongues and tiny blue-tinged teeth inside.

Eight, ten of them. All thought-speaking at once.

<Human, sell me your memories!>

<Come visit my nightmare theater!>

Their necks protrude from shoulders like flat serving platters. Two arms drop from the shoulders. Each one is jointed three times, ending in a grasping hand made up of three clawlike fingers.

The aliens' knees hinge the wrong way. The bottom part of their legs lay flat against the ground, extending forward. The feet are naked and have one long toe and two short ones.

The grossest part is their midsection. It's an accordion made of veined, pink flesh. It moves up and down, wheezing and whining as the aliens beg.

<Your eyes will fetch top dollar in the best boutiques! Especially if they are still attached to your head!>

<Your nose hairs are too long! I will braid them for you!>

You shrink back in horror. That's when you realize you're a dizzying distance in the air. Inches from the end of a platform miles from the ground. A platform with no railing. Fall and it would take a couple of hours to land. Suddenly you feel dizzy.

<Watch it!> Ax uses his tail to pull you away from the edge.

"Back off!" Jake says to the aliens. He roughly pushes one that comes too close.

"Iskoort," Cassie says. She sounds puzzled.

You're relieved to see all of the Animorphs are with you. Also, relieved that they seem to know where you are.

<What are we doing here?> Tobias demands.

"Don't you remember?" Marco asks. "We joined the frequent fighter plan last time."

"One thing we are *not* doing is selling my hair," Rachel says firmly. "It took me weeks to get a decent ponytail after my last Iskoort trim."

"I assume the Ellimist transported us here," someone says. You realize you've never met the kid who's talking. He has brown hair, just a little over his ears.

"Hi," you say.

"Hi. I'm Erek King."

"Something tells me this is not a vacation," Jake says.

YOU ARE CORRECT.

You clear your throat. "Turns out the Ellimist was a little annoyed we made another Animorph," you explain.

YOU WILL FIGHT THE HOWLERS AGAIN. THIS TIME IT WILL BE EIGHT AGAINST SEVEN. YOU WILL HAVE AN EXTRA ALLY — FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE.

"Why do I get the idea he knows something we don't?" Marco asks.

Rachel shrugs. "We won last time. How hard will it be to beat them again?"

I WILL ERASE YOUR MEMORY OF THIS PLACE. YOU WILL BEGIN THE TEST AGAIN.

"That is so not fair!" Marco says.

"What's not fair?" Jake asks.

"Huh?" Marco asks. "What are you talking about?"

"I — I don't know."

AND TO THE NEWEST ANIMORPH, CHOOSE YOUR MORPHS. I WILL PROVIDE YOU WITH THOSE YOU DO NOT HAVE. ANDALITE, SHARK, AND KOMODO DRAGON. OR FLY, HAWK, AND HORK-BAJIR.

"What is this — McDonald's?" Marco asks. "Do you want fries with that?"

Ax's main eyes flicker toward you. Why? Does he dislike the idea of you morphing an Andalite?

YOUR FRIENDS CANNOT HELP YOU. CHOOSE.

If you choose Andalite, shark, and Komodo dragon, go to chapter 8. If you choose fly, hawk, and Hork-Bajir, go to chapter 11.

CHAPTER 8

THE BATTLE BEGINS NOW.

"Howler!" Erek yells and points.

You look.

The Howler moves up a stairway and comes to stand on your platform. He is about the size of a large man. Two arms, two legs, and five-fingered hands that look almost human. From the wrist projects a retractable claw with four hooked, steel-tipped claws.

The head is black, pebbled skin. Beneath the black, in the cracks and creases of the flesh, are lines of bright red. He looks like he's made of molten lava.

He is wearing a series of loose belts around his torso. Each one holds a different weapon. Dragon beam. Knives. Boomerangs. Guns of different sizes and shapes.

"Morph," Jake says. "Ax? You take the lead. Tobias? Get some altitude. EreK? Stay out of the way."

Stay out of the way? You wonder about why EreK isn't fighting. But now isn't the time to ask questions.

Ax has his tail bowed and ready, three eyes on the Howler. One on you.

A few steps back, the others begin to morph.

Orange fur sprouts on Jake's hands and arms. His fingers swell into claws. A long tail springs out from the base of his spine and immediately begins to twitch. He is a tiger; the same tiger you saw fight in your house.

Rachel is morphing to grizzly bear. A massive pillar of rough brown fur. Marco is morphing gorilla. Cassie, wolf.

EreK had moved back under the stairway. He was talking. "You've got to be careful of the Howler's voice. His howl will paralyze you, numb your senses —"

The Howler's hand moves. He is reaching for a weapon!

You have to morph. But to what? Surely not a shark. You're on dry land! That leaves two choices: Andalite or Komodo dragon.

If you choose Andalite, go to chapter 9. If you choose Komodo dragon, go to chapter 10.

CHAPTER 9

<G>o for it!> Jake yells.

Go for it? You can't! Not until you morph.

You look at Ax. *Andalite*, you think. *Morph an Andalite*.

Muscles ripple across your legs, adding bulk and definition at the same time. An extra pair of legs sprout from your hips and muscle up with shocking speed.

FLUMMP! You fall forward on all fours.

You can hardly believe the effortless power. It's like turning into Schwarzenegger without even doing a single crunch.

You feel a distant almost-pain as the Andalite tail stretches out from the base of your spine.

Growing, growing, growing until it is almost as long as your body. You hold it up off the ground.

SPLING!

The blade edge is the last part of the tail to burst out. It glimmers in the dull Iskoort sunlight.

Your stalk eyes grow out of your skull like an antenna rising out of an expensive sports car. You hear the eyeballs pop out on the ends.

Paamp! Poomp!

Suddenly you can see everywhere at once. Up. Down. Left. Right. Front. Back. All 360 degrees.

Behind you, Iskoort. Some watching the fight. The others going about their business of buying and selling. To either side, steep drops off the edge of the platform.

In front of you, the others surging forward. Rushing the Howler as a group. Tobias in the air. Jake leaping. Cassie running low to the ground. Rachel galloping forward on all fours. Ax moving swiftly to the Howler's right. Marco moving surprisingly fast on his bowed legs.

You don't know what to do! How can you help the others? But then the Andalite mind wells up under your own. The mind is arrogant, almost cocky. Result: Your panic fades. You are ready for battle.

The Andalite mind is calculating, thinking strategically. You need to get in close. That's the only way you can use your tail.

You run forward, hooves thundering against the smooth Iskoort pavement. You feel clumsy and unsure. Having a strange new body is like playing a video game when you're not sure how all of the controls work.

"Hhhhhrrroooooowwwrrrr!" Jake roars as he leaps.

You are there! In the battle. Moving onto the Howler's left. You flex your massive tail muscle and let it rip.

FWAAPP!

You stumble sideways, knocked off balance with the impact.

The Howler's hand drops. The weapon clatters down. But before the weapon stops rolling, the hand is growing back!

You draw back for another strike. But your tail hits Marco's chest, drawing blood.

<Watch it!> Marco shouts.

<Draw your tail back over your own body!> Ax instructs.

<Sorry!> you yell.

Then the Howler lets loose.

"KEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE-row."

The sound is a blast like nothing you've ever heard.

Cassie howls in pain.

"KEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE-row."

Jake misses his leap and falls in a tangle on the steps. Rachel trips and falls, landing on top of Jake. Tobias is falling out of the air.

Everything blurs. A swirling, mad, red blur. You reel and run! You clasp your strange Andalite fingers over your ears and feel blood seeping between the fingers.

"KEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE-row."

The third howl knocks you to your knees.

You die with blood flowing from your eyes and ears. Howlers are weapons designed to kill sentient species. Bad morph choice. Go back to page 32 and try again.

CHAPTER 10

<Attack!> Jake yells.

You concentrate on the Komodo dragon. Drawing up a mental picture of the creature is easy enough. You once saw an hour-long special about the dragons on PBS.

Your skin dries and thickens. Then, rapidly, it turns Godzilla-green and pebbly. Your fingers lengthen and your fingernails grow pointed and sharp.

Your tongue is stretching, narrowing until it hangs down over your chin. You watch in horror as the tip splits in two and the entire thing turns yellow. The tongue twitches. Without thinking, you slurp it into your mouth.

Food!

You spin around.

The wind is coming from behind you and it carries the smell of rotting flesh. Half a mile away is something dead, something you can eat. You start to trot toward it. The dragon's mind is simple, ancient. A predator's mind. Focused on only one thing: food.

You run forward on your half-human, half-dragon feet. That way — the sweet, rotting smell is coming from there.

No . . . wait! This isn't what you're supposed to be doing. With an effort, you force yourself to stop running. You gain control over the dragon's mind.

By now your jaw has shot out and filled up with large, curved, jagged teeth.

Your neck gets bigger and bigger. You lower yourself down onto all fours as an enormous tail begins to stretch out from the base of your spine.

ERG! ERG! ERG! ERG!

The tail spurts out in bursts.

One foot! Two feet! Three feet! Four feet!

FWAAPP!

Ax and the Howler are already fighting.

Tobias hurtles down on the Howler from above, talons outstretched.

You hear a clatter as the Howler drops a weapon. The sound is strange, distorted. Your ears have shriveled up and disappeared.

Cassie is fully wolf now. She runs forward, teeth bared. Marco lumbers forward on gorilla legs.

Your eyes migrate to the sides of your head. Through the dragon eyes, the colors of the Lego-land look washed out. Then —

Movement!

<More Howlers!> you yell in thought-speak.
<They're coming down the stairs!>

"Hhhhhrrroooowwwrrrr!" Jake roars as he leaps.

Rachel barrels ahead on all fours.

Then one of the Howlers lets loose.

"KEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE-row."

Cassie howls in pain. Jake misses his leap and falls in a tangle on the steps. Rachel trips and falls, landing on top of Jake. Tobias falls out of the air. Ax is reeling, running.

You hear . . . nothing.

Yes!

The dragon's hearing is somehow insensitive to the Howlers' most powerful weapon.

The Howlers are circling the others.

You have to attack! The dragon's mind resists.

The dragon wants to find someplace and hide. Find someplace and wait until the prey draws near. . . .

"KEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE-row."

Marco swings a fist, hitting a Howler on his arm and spinning the creature sideways. The Howler twirls around on his weird waist and brings up a weapon.

F-t-t-t-t-t!

He fires! A dozen steel darts, tiny triangles, whiz through the air. A bloody hole appears in Marco's back. He drops like a load of bricks.

Cassie recovers enough to bound into action. The Howler raises the gun, but too slow. Wolf jaws clamp down on the arm and Cassie holds on like a bulldog, ripping, tearing.

You force the dragon forward. You move fast, your claws making a sound like a muffled machine gun. All you can see are the Howlers' lava-like feet. You bite with your strong jaws. Rip at the exposed flesh with your claws.

Nothing.

No cry of pain.

Is the Howler even hurt?

You can't tell.

Yet the dragon mind is satisfied, ready to rest. The dragon knows these Howlers will die. Your

bite contains a poison. The Howlers will grow weak in a few days' time.

A few days? You don't have that long!

One of the Howlers draws his flechette gun. He shoots triangular steel darts at you.

You are killed before you can morph out. Go back to page 32 and try again.

CHAPTER 11

You're behind Jake, Cassie, and Marco as their bodies begin to grow muscles, fur, and claws. You can hear Tobias's wings fluttering above you as he gains altitude.

Ax and the Howler face off, circling each other for half a turn. Then —

FWAPP!

Ax slashes out with his tail blade, knocking the Howler in the shoulder. Spinning him around on his weird lazy-Susan waist.

The Howler uses the momentum to bring up a weapon. A Dracon beam. He fires.

Ax dodges. The shot goes wide.

You're confused. Everything is happening so fast! You've only morphed once. And you've

never been in a battle before. "What should I morph?" you demand.

Nobody answers.

The Howler aims again. Point-blank at Ax's head.

"Ax, go left!" Erek yells from his place under the steps.

Tobias swoops out of the air with his claws forward, aiming for the Howler's sky-blue eyes. The Howler brings up a hand, moves sideways.

Hawk, you decide.

"Six more Howlers," Erek reports. "Coming up the stairs."

<Forget the battle mor — > Jake says. His orange-and-black tiger fur rapidly begins to fade. His muzzle collapses and his human mouth re-emerges. "GGGGrrrrroaro — Go fly! That means everyone."

You focus on the fly DNA inside you, and begin to shrink. Spiky legs grow out of your chest. Your internal organs melt away to be replaced by simpler insect organs. Your mouth and nose sprout out to become a horrible, long proboscis.

The bright Legoland is a shattered mirror of images. The fly's compound eyes see with a thousand tiny, irregular, bewildering TV sets, each tuned to a slightly different channel.

"The Howlers are here!" Erek cries.

<Let's go!> Jake yells.

You power your fly wings and take off like a jet helicopter — straight up! You see massive red-and-black hands reaching for you. One gets close and you hit reverse, zipping back through the clutching fingers.

With your compound eyes the Howlers seem to be made of glowing purple and blue with pulsating black veins. The facets in your fun-house-mirror eyes break them into pieces. They are everywhere around you as you fly unmolested, unnoticed.

You do a midair flip and zip after the others.

<Some fight,> Rachel says.

<Yeah,> Marco agrees. <We showed them who's boss.>

At least we escaped, you think.

CHAPTER 12

UYou find an Iskoort guide. A place to hide.

That evening, you sleep in shifts. Two on guard at all times. You're on watch with Erek, staring into the darkness. Watchful for any sound that may signal a Howler attack.

"You can relax," Erek says. "I will hear the Howlers coming long before you will."

"Why?" you ask.

"I am Chee," Erek tells you. "Part of an android race created thousands of years ago. My hearing is vastly superior to human hearing."

"Is that why you served as a lookout today?" you ask.

"No," Erek says. "I could not fight. I am programmed to be nonviolent."

"Who programmed you?" you ask.

"The Pemalites created the Chee," Erek explains. "The Pemalites were a peaceful race. Then one day, the Howlers appeared out of Z-space and decimated them. I will help you defeat the Howlers any way I can. However, I cannot kill or hurt a living being."

After two hours, Rachel and Tobias relieve you. Erek, being an android, needs no sleep. You curl up on one of the soft beds the Iskoort have made available to you. Try to get some sleep.

A smell like oil and mothballs and . . .

"Insecticide!" Rachel says.

You come awake with a jolt.

<Howlers!> Tobias yells.

What to do? The Howlers are pumping poison into your hideout. They have learned fast. Too fast. Insect morphs are no longer a choice.

What morph do you choose? If you choose hawk, go to chapter 13. If you choose Hork-Bajir, go to chapter 17.

CHAPTER 13

The stench of poison is growing stronger by the second.

You're already morphing to hawk. Feathers sprouting out of your skin. Flesh oozing and shifting like mud sliding down a hill. Your face crumpling, then extruding as a hard beak forms. Toes becoming talons.

The others are morphing birds, too. You could stock an aviary. A bald eagle, a pair of ospreys, a northern harrier, two red-tailed hawks, and a peregrine falcon.

<Erek!> Jake demands. <Can you project a hologram through another window? A hologram of us?>

"Absolutely. There would be no harm to the

Howlers, and it might save you. That would be well within my parameters."

<On three,> Jake says. <One, two, NOW!>

The far window slides open. Instantly seven birds fly toward it. Dracon beams burn. Flechette guns rattle. The Howlers are attacking the hologram. Jake's plan is working!

The near window opens. You spread your wings and flap with all your strength.

You blow out of the window, flapping like crazy, desperate for every foot of distance. The others instantly pull ahead.

But you've never been a bird before. You're overwhelmed by your freedom to move in three dimensions. By the eyesight that makes each puffy orange Iskoort tree a composition of a thousand details.

TSSEEEEW!

<Agggghhh!> you yell.

A pain! Like a red-hot poker driven into your wing. You've been hit!

<Down, down, down!> Jake yells.

You're still flying! Okay. The Dracon blast wasn't bad. It's not over yet.

The others are diving. Down into the maze of trees and bushes and flowers. You follow, blazing along the lane, inches above the heads of Iskoort out walking in the early light of dawn.

B-r-r-r-r-r-r-t-t!

A line of flechettes tears a tree apart inches ahead of you.

The Howlers are after you!

You turn a sharp left, banking around a line of trees. A Howler bursts from the vegetation ahead.

<Pull up!> Tobias yells.

Tseeeew! Tseeeew!

Marco's left wing is gone, falling like burning embers among the strolling Iskoort. Marco tumbles, out of control, falling like a stone. He hits the ground, disappears from view.

Jake dives after him.

A Howler jumps from an overhanging tree. He aims his beam weapon even as he falls.

Tseeeew! Tseeeew!

<Aggghhh!> Jake hollers.

<We have to help Jake and Marco!> you yell.
You bank hard right.

Tree!

You swerve around, straining your wing muscles to the popping point. Straighten up. And then —

Bonk!

You slam headfirst into a tree you never saw coming. You fall to the ground, knocked silly.

An Iskoort is standing over you, staring down.

<Call a member of the Embalmers Guild!> he calls.

<I'm not dead yet,> you reply.

Jake is hollering in your head. <The Ellimist and Crayak have an agreement. They can't kill the Iskoort! Use the Iskoort for cover!>

<Ax! Behind you!>

<Here comes another one!>

The others are running for their lives.

Your head is starting to clear. You sit up.

Flap. Flap. Flap. Cassie lands next to you.

<Are you okay?>

<Yeah . . . I think so,> you say.

<Then let's haul!> Cassie takes off, straining for altitude.

You flap once, twice. You're high enough to see a Howler. He's bounding toward you, his dead blue eyes focused on you. <Cassie — watch out!> you scream.

TSEEEEEW! The Howler fires!

A bald eagle attacks! Rachel.

You flap up, turn toward the Howler.

He brings his Dracon beam up, aims.

TSEEEEEW! TSEEEEEW!

<Agggghhhh!>

Cassie tumbles out of the air.

<Cassie!> Rachel screams.

<I'm . . . I'm okay. . . . I'll demorph. . . . Don't worry.>

The Howler is closing in on Cassie, weapon drawn.

You dive.

Rachel dives.

You reach out, ready to rake the Howler's bald head with your talons.

TSEEEEW! TSEEEEW!

The Howler fires at point-blank range.

<NO!> Rachel screams.

You stare down in horror. Cassie couldn't have survived that blast. Her osprey body is smoking. You can smell the acrid odor of burning flesh.

Suddenly a group of Iskoort come zipping down the path. They walk over Cassie's body and it disappears.

<Hey!> you yell.

Rachel swoops to attack.

<Easy, easy,> Tobias says. <It's us.>

Erek has created a hologram of Iskoort. Ax, Marco, and Tobias are hidden inside. Erek drops the hologram long enough to examine Cassie, to see if there is some way he can save her.

After a tense moment, the hologram reappears. "I'm sorry," Erek says. "Cassie is dead."

<No . . .> Rachel says. Her fierce eagle eyes are blank. But you can hear the pain in her voice.

The others are silent as you rendezvous with guide and find a new place to hide. An abandoned factory. Filled with mysterious, dusty machinery.

Erek sets Cassie's osprey body down on the seat of a strange machine that was like a merry-go-round for tools. Rachel finds an old blanket and covers her up. You and Rachel demorph.

"What happened to Jake?" you ask.

<I saw him go over the edge,> Ax says.

"Is he . . . gone?" you ask.

<No,> Tobias says harshly. <I'm going to find him.>

"I'll go with you," Rachel says.

<No,> Tobias says again. <If the Howlers attack, you'll need maximum firepower here. I'll go alone.>

Tobias leaves.

As soon as he is gone, Rachel turns to you, her eyes shining with grief and worry. Her intensity frightens you.

"This is all your fault," she says quietly.

Marco has also demorphed and watches silently from a few feet away.

<Rachel,> Ax says. <We are all sad. Blaming one another will not help.>

Rachel's eyes are locked onto yours. Blazing with anger.

"My fault?" you ask meekly.

"You got Cassie killed," she says.

"Rachel," Marco tries.

But Rachel doesn't back off. She's right up in your face. "I want you to promise me something," she says.

"What?" you ask.

"That you'll stay out of the way from now on," Rachel says. "I don't want you getting anyone else killed."

Do you promise? If you do, go to chapter 14. If you refuse, go to chapter 16.

CHAPTER 14

"Fine," you say. "I promise not to take any more chances."

Rachel finally backs off. Retreats to a corner with her grief. Marco and Ax go after her. You can hear the three of them whispering but you can't hear what they're saying.

You sit with your back against a wall and wait for Tobias and Jake to return. Erek sits silently a few yards off. You almost have the sense he is protecting you.

You're numb. Horrified by Cassie's death. Racked with guilt. But unsure what you could have done to prevent it. Maybe if you had just ignored that box. Never picked it up.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

Hours creep by. Then —

Flap, flap, flap.

You jump to your feet as one — no, two! — birds fly into the factory. Relief rushes over you as the others come running.

<Prince Jake!>

“Jake!”

“Oh, Jake . . . Cassie . . . Cassie is . . .”

Jake lands next to where Cassie’s small form is laid out. He begins to grow out of his falcon form, to reemerge as human. As his human mouth forms, he lets out a scream filled with rage and grief that turns your stomach.

Hours pass as Jake sits next to Cassie. The sun is going down when he calls you together. “I have a plan,” Jake announces.

You put it in motion the next morning.

Guide leads you to an empty store at the end of a long, narrow street. Ax leaves. Goes out for a stroll on the crowded streets, hoping to lure the Howlers to you.

Tobias, floating high above the narrow streets, reports the scene by thought-speak.

<The Howlers are sticking together. Not as cocky as they were, though. They should spot him any second now. Any second now.>

"Do it now," Rachel says to you.

You nod slowly, wishing you had never agreed to stay out of the way. Now that the plan is underway, now that the others are facing danger, you feel like a coward.

"DO IT," Rachel orders.

"All right!" You start to morph.

Down, down, down you shrink. You feel a loose liquid sensation inside as your human organs slide and fuse. Coarse hairs grow on your arms, your legs.

Two extra legs explode out of your chest.

<What are they, blind?> Tobias wonders. <Ax is getting awfully close. The crowd is blocking their view of him. Too many Iskoort in the way. Oh, man! He's too . . . they see him! Ax-man, run! Run!>

Your mouth and nose elongate into a powerful sucking straw.

The fly's compound vision blinks in. You can see Rachel again. See her face from a thousand slightly different angles. Only now her angry, accusing human face has turned into the fierce face of a grizzly.

<Climb aboard,> Rachel says.

You power the crazy fly wings, zooming up and up and coming to rest behind the bear's upside-down U of an ear.

"It's time," Jake says. "I have to do this. Rachel, you know what to do. If I get out of control, can't control the morph. If I start that howl . . . you'll have to do it."

If Jake lost control of the morph, Rachel would . . . would do what she had to do. Quickly. Before Jake could hurt any of us.

You're lost in a dense thicket of brown fur. Clinging with your clingy fly feet. You can't see, can't affect the outcome of the battle, but you can still hear what's happening.

<They're on him!> Tobias yells. <All six of them. Like hounds after a rabbit. Man! That boy can run! Ax-man! Opening to your right!>

Tense minutes pass. You know Jake is morphing a Howler, but you can't see it. Nobody speaks. Until —

<You can let me go,> Jake tells Rachel.

<Are you sure?>

<Yeah,> Jake says. <This thing isn't out of control. The killing is a game to the Howlers. They're having fun. They're enjoying it. >

<Here they come!> Tobias yelled. <Thirty seconds. Crowd is thinning out, Ax-man! They're gonna have a shot!>

The sound of flechette guns, in the street outside our door, only a dozen feet from us.

<Aaahhhh!> Ax cries in pain.

<He's hit!> Tobias yells.

WHAM!

You hear Ax's hooves. Pounding that has to be a Howler following him. A scuffle. Thumps, bangs, creaks. Moans. Groans. Flechette gunfire. The sound of fists impacting with flesh.

You guess that Rachel is running, fighting, dodging. You can feel the air moving over your sensitive fly parts. But you can't make out what is happening. Then —

<No!> Jake yells. <Forget them! This way!>

Staying down, hiding in Rachel's fur, is unbearable. But it's too late now. You can't help. You're powerless in your fly morph. And you have your promise to keep.

The flood of sounds and vibrations continues. Some sort of weapon burning for minutes. Slaps. Bodies falling. Guide whining with fear.

<NOW!> Jake yells in thought-speak. <Marco! The memory emitter! Now! He's getting up!>

What's happening? you wonder desperately. Where is Marco? Why isn't he responding?

The plan was to pour all of your collective memories into the Howler's head. Your life plus the lives of Jake and Rachel and Marco and Ax and Tobias. Even Guide. And the long, long mem-

ory of EreK. Once inside the Howler's head, the memories would flow into the endless pool of collective Howler memory.

Suddenly, silence.

No battle sounds.

No Dracon beam fire.

Quiet.

<What happened?> you ask cautiously.

"They're gone," EreK says. "The Howlers disappeared."

CHAPTER 15

Iskoort world vanishes. Simply disappears. You are no longer a fly.

You are in your own true body, sitting in the back of a convertible limousine. A gentle breeze blows on your face as you're riding through New York City. Confetti floats down from a cloudless blue sky. Cheering crowds line the street and shout your name.

"Who changed the channel?" Rachel growls. <Elimist,> Ax says.

"Ticker-tape parade," Marco says. "Does this mean the Yankees won another World Series?"

You spin around and count your companions. Marco, Ax, Jake, Rachel, Tobias. . . .

No Cassie.

ADMITTING YOUR LIMITATIONS IS NOT EASY.

The booming voice easily fills the canyon of skyscrapers.

"No joke," you grumble.

YOU HAVE PASSED THE TEST.

"Thanks."

BUT THE COST WAS HIGH. YOUR ACTIONS TOOK A LIFE.

I WILL DO THE SAME.

"What? What do you mean?" you holler. "We had a deal. If I won, you would save my parents!"

ONE.

"That wasn't the deal!"

YOU MUST CHOOSE.

"Choose? But that's impossible!"

How can you choose? Choosing to let one of your parents live means choosing to let the other die. Would your father wish to live with the knowledge that your mother was infested? Would your mother wish to live with the knowledge that your father was a slave?

The rest of the Animorphs are watching you. Rachel angry. Ax resigned. Marco volatile. Tobias's hawk eyes fierce, impossible to read. And Jake . . .

Jake imploring. Haunted.

You know what you have to do.

"I choose Cassie," you say.

And she suddenly appears. Sitting between Jake and Rachel.

Smiling.

"Hey!" she says. "I love ticker-tape parades!"

Nice choice. Very nice choice.

CHAPTER 16

Someone shakes you awake in the middle of the night. Ax. <Gas!> he says in thought-speak. <Use your fly morph. We have to get out.>

You're groggy, confused. The room is black. A darkness so deep it is featureless. You hear someone pounding at the door, the others rushing around.

You morph.

You can't see the ground rushing up, your nose stretching out, or the fly's weird compound vision blink on. But you are more aware of the changes going on inside you. You're not in pain. But you can hear the slooshing, slurping changes.

Then —

A rush of air! Not much, but clear to your fly senses. Something clamps down on you!

You power up your wings. Take off.

A ceiling!

You zoom forward.

A wall!

You hit reverse.

Another wall.

Bzzzzzzzzzzzz . . .

Your wings hit against the ceiling and walls, making a sound like an insect trapped inside a glass.

A glass . . .

You are inside a vessel ten times taller than you and half as wide.

Trapped.

<Ax?> you call. <Jake?>

No answer.

Demorph, you think.

You focus on your own body and begin to change. Soon you are a strange lump of flesh, pressing out against the walls.

But the vessel doesn't break. The walls and ceiling press in, crushing you.

No, no, no!

You morph back to fly. You're beginning to panic. Have the Howlers captured you? No, that

can't be right. Howlers don't take prisoners. Howlers attack. They're not about stealth.

Then you remember . . .

Ax's voice. Ax telling you to morph fly.

You're a prisoner, but not of the Howlers.

You're a prisoner of the Animorphs.

<Why are you doing this to me?> you ask.

Silence.

And then Rachel's voice. <You're a risk. We have to get rid of you before you get anyone else killed.>

It takes two hours for you to become a *nothlit*.
A person trapped in morph.

Two hours of horror.

You spend it crying, threatening, pleading.

You know when the two hours are up because someone lifts the glass and sets you free.

You're a nothlit. And unfortunately flies only live for two weeks. Go back to page 56 and try again.

CHAPTER 17

Erek, Guide, and Tobias watch impatiently as the rest of you morph.

You go Hork-Bajir. Cassie and Marco morph osprey. Jake goes falcon. Rachel goes bald eagle. Ax to northern harrier.

While the others shrink, you shoot up to two feet. You are tall enough to brush your head on the ceiling of the Iskoort room.

Your face elongates. The jaw bulges out and becomes smooth as a bullet. Lips stretch out and out. Your eyes narrow.

Your skin turns green-black. Your toes shift and merge into the three-toed, one-spur feet of the Hork-Bajir. Your tailbone bulges out and grows vertebra by vertebra.

Turning into a Hork-Bajir is bizarre, to put it mildly. The last time you saw one of the nightmare creatures, they were tearing your house to shreds. Now you are turning into one of the "Wild Things."

SHWOOP! Blades slide from your forehead.

SHWOOP! Blades at your wrists and elbows!

SHWOOP! Blades at your knees.

You like this morph. You feel secure in this body. Strong. But you brace yourself, expecting to struggle with the violent Hork-Bajir mind. It floods in as a rush of instincts. But not violent instincts. You want to . . . run. Run and climb.

<Let's go!> Tobias says. <Birds don't tolerate poison that much better than bugs.>

<Neither do Hork-Bajir,> you say. The fumes are starting to make you dizzy.

<Point taken,> Jake says. <On three. One, two, NOW!>

The others move toward the window. You let them go first. Six birds flapping desperately.

You climb out on the narrow ledge, knowing you have to hurry. You look down. You're five stories up. It's dizzying, terrifying.

But the Hork-Bajir knows no fear. Doesn't understand the concept of falling. You let the Hork-Bajir instincts take over.

You swing your talon feet out of the window,

then flip around to face the room. You cling to the windowsill with strong four-fingered hands.

Down! the Hork-Bajir thinks.

You give a little kick to place your knee blades. Srreeeccch!

Your blades won't grip! You scramble, trying desperately to bring yourself back up, to crawl back through the window.

But now gravity is pulling you down. The poison is slowing your reflexes. The Howlers are running and leaping around the corner of the building. They've seen you!

Srreeeccch!

Srreeeccch!

Srreeeccch!

Srreeeccch!

Your horn blades sound like fingernails on a blackboard as you slide down the Iskoort facade, gathering speed. Then you lose even that tenuous connection.

Splat!

You're dead.

Bad morph choice. Hork-Bajir blades are adapted for bark — not Iskoort buildings. Go back to page 49 and try again.

CHAPTER 18

The white void vanishes.

You're in a forest. Surrounded by trees and massive shoulder-high ferns. Bright, buttery sunlight filters through the leaves.

"Hrrrrhuh!"

You jump. A grunting, snuffling sound is coming from behind you. You hear branches being pushed back. Something moving. Something big.

"What's that?" Cassie asks apprehensively.

Ax turns in a slow circle, tail blade ready.

<I'll check it out,> Tobias offers. He flaps up through the trees.

Crash! Crash!

Still behind you. But closer.

"HuuuuRRROOOOAAAARR!"

Wham! Wham! The ground shakes with the impact tremors. Something is coming!

<Run!> Tobias shouts.

You don't have to be told twice.

Crash! Crash! Crash!

The earth trembles! You have to fight to stay on your feet, to keep moving forward.

"HrrrrrRRROOOOAAAARRRR-unh!"

Right behind you! You glance back. What you see almost makes you pee in your pants.

You're being chased by . . . by a reptile. But it's a reptile out of a Godzilla movie. It's half the length of a football field and the size of a small house. Its jagged teeth glimmer wetly.

"T-rex?" you mutter in horror.

Impossible!

Crazy!

And only a few feet away!

"HrrrrrRRROOOOAAAARRRR!"

Run!

Your heart is hammering against your rib cage, your skin is covered in cold sweat. You're screaming, crying as you flee. Leaves slap your face. Twigs whip your bare arms.

The others are ahead. You catch glimpses of them.

CRASH! CRASH!

You push hard. Run all out.

The T-rex is gaining.

Maybe a foot away now!

CRASH! CRASH! CRASH! CRASH!

A root catches your foot! You're flying, tumbling. Then —

"Ah!" You hit the ground hard. You can't breathe. Can't move. You're frozen from sheer panic.

Down comes the T-rex's head. Hungry eyes lock on your gut. You can feel the heat of breath on your face. It smells rancid.

This is the end. You squeeze your eyes closed. Then —

CHOOSE YOUR MORPH. COCKROACH OR WOLF.

The Ellimist.

"What are you doing?" you yell. "Trying to get me killed?"

You open your eyes. Expecting to be safe. Expecting to see the world on "pause."

"HRRRRRRRRROOOOAAAARRRR!" Inches away from your nose, powerful jaws roar open. You see rows of teeth, a sofa-size tongue.

"Aaaagggggghhh!" you scream.

CRUNCH!

The T-rex chomps its jaws a hair's width from your right ear. You grab your ear with both hands. Crying, trembling.

CHOOSE.

If you choose roach, go to chapter 19. If you choose wolf, go to chapter 26.

CHAPTER 19

UYou roll. Stumble to your feet.

What good is a roach morph? What good is any morph now? T-rex is going to turn you into dinner before you have a chance to morph.

The massive head comes down again. So close you can see the pebbly skin, look into one dark, damp nostril.

Instinctively, you dodge behind a tree.

You focus some small part of your brain on the roach. Imagine the small, easily compactible body. *Long* to become it.

“HrrrrrRRROOOOAAAARRRR!” The T-rex screams with rage.

WHAM! WHAM!

It’s coming around the tree for you.

You can't hide.

You can't outrun it.

You can't morph fast enough.

Only one chance.

You run straight for the gaping maw. Get splashed by dripping dinosaur saliva. Graze your back on the huge chin.

You run though dinosaur legs as big as massive columns. Under a belly that rises above you like a low-slung pebbly gray ceiling.

The T-rex can't reach you. Can't get its massive head under its legs. It leaps up and spins around, turning almost gracefully except for the tree it knocks over with its tail.

As you run you're starting to shrink. Four feet. Three and three quarters. Three and a half.

Looking down at your feet, you see your chest cover with an armor plate of brown cockroach shell. It's disgusting, but at least it means the morph is working.

Your fingers melt together. Next time you look, they've formed a single, many-jointed bug leg.

SPLOUT! SPLOUT!

Antennae jump out of your forehead as you run out from under the T-rex's tail. Your body is growing clumsy as your legs start to thin.

Three and a quarter feet. Three feet. Two and three quarters.

You hunker down, trying to hide beneath the ferns. Your waist pinches together. The lower part of your body swells to form a bloated insect abdomen. Your skull melts away. Your ears and hearing fade, making the roar of T-rex sound far away.

Which is a good thing.

Because the T-rex is close. It is patiently sniffing through the ferns, searching for you with its Buick-size snout.

The roach mind bubbles up at the same time extra legs suddenly pop out of your chest.

I'm cool, the roach mind seems to say. The roach is happy under the ferns. Calm, collected.

Then —

CHOMP!

It has you!

Up, up, up you go. A two-foot roach impaled on an even bigger dinosaur tooth. High into the air.

Wet, pink, warm. You're in T-rex's mouth! Lolling in a pond of spit just under its slab of a tongue.

Somehow, you manage to keep your concentration, to keep morphing. Now you are a foot long. Half a foot. You pop free of the massive tooth. You're ripped practically in two. But somehow you're still alive.

T-rex clamps down. But now you're more roach than human and the space between the dinosaur's teeth and gums seems like a huge pink cavern.

Go toward the light, you think.

Now the roach mind is starting to panic, to protest. You fight for control. You crawl right out over the T-rex's lip and out onto its pebbly skin.

Must tickle.

The T-rex gives a massive swing of its huge head, and sends you flying.

<Agggggghhhh!>

Down, down, down.

You catch a flash of blue, green, brown.

Thunk!

You land on your back in the mossy soil. Wiggling your legs in the air. You stretch, scramble, stretch, scramble, and flip.

You're right side up and alive.

Killing a cockroach is hard.

CHAPTER 20

Uou squish yourself down under a nice piece of moss next to a tree root. The roach body makes itself small, stays perfectly still.

The T-rex doesn't know you fell out of its mouth. Isn't interested anymore. It has found new prey.

<Watch out, Marco!>

<Coming up behind you!>

From your hiding place, you can't see what's happening to your friends. But you notice their calls and shouts are growing distant. Even the T-rex's footfalls fade away.

You're a bug alone in Dinoland.

Now what?

Find the others, you think.

That means demorphing. Has to. Catching up with them as a roach would take forever.

Reluctantly, you concentrate on your own body and feel the changes begin. Antennae dissolve. The roach's exoskeleton softens into human skin. Extra legs wilt and slurp up into your chest.

And you grow. Up out of your safe moss hide-away. Zooming up to your own true height.

A grinding sound as your bones grow back and join together to form a skeleton. A *slish slosh* as your stomach, kidneys, pancreas, and blood vessels spring back. Your heart reappears and immediately begins banging against your rib cage.

Now you're a human alone in Dinoland.

You walk, then trot, then start to run.

"You guys! Wait up!" you shout.

Nobody answers.

Following the trail isn't difficult.

You can see the snapped saplings and crushed ferns where the T-rex pushed through the forest. You can follow the dinosaur's talon prints.

There's one every five or six feet.

You run until your lungs burn and your side aches.

You slow it to a walk and trudge along. Your bare feet are bloody and bruised.

The sounds of the forest terrify you.

Twigs snapping.

Leaves crunching.

Something scampering through the low vegetation.

The light under the trees starts to fade. The sky shades from blue to deeper blue to red. The trees around you begin to lose their sharpness.

Twilight is coming on.

Then night.

You have maybe ten minutes of daylight. Twenty, tops.

Do dinosaurs hunt at night?

You have no idea.

You come out of the woods and into what looks like a big pasture full of tall grass. You see a flickering light off in the distance. You smell something —

Smoke!

And something else —

Meat!

You start to run.

Jake, Cassie, Marco, Rachel and Ax fill you in

on their adventures while you chew on what turns out to be T-rex shish kebabs.

Here's the deal:

Ax killed the T-rex seconds before it killed Marco.

Cassie figured out how to turn the T-rex hide into food and shoes.

Rachel used a couple of twigs to start a fire.

After eating a couple of chunks of meat, you are starting to yawn big time. The run through the forest, the constant adrenaline rushes are getting to you. Your eyelids are hard to hold up. So is your head.

The others are still talking, still discussing the situation.

You stretch out on your side next to the fire. You make a pillow out of your hands and close your eyes. Almost immediately you fade into a dreamless sleep.

At first you're not sure what wakes you up. You stare at the black night. Roll over and blink at the blazing fire.

Cassie and Ax are on their feet. Rachel is shaking herself awake. Everyone is staring out into the darkness.

"What is it?" you ask, sitting up.

Jake's voice. He's running out of the dark-

ness. "Everyone get out of the way!" he yells.
"Stampede."

"Stampede?" Marco demands incredulously.
"What is this, a cowboy movie?"

"MOVE!" Jake yells.

***Do you morph roach? Go to chapter 21. Do you
run? Go to chapter 22.***

CHAPTER 21

M*orph, morph, morph!* you think.

You can already hear the dinosaurs coming.
Boom! Boom! Boom!

You try to focus your panicky mind on the cockroach. Antennae sprout violently from your head. The changes are beginning!

Faster, you think.

A sound like rolling thunder. Like a train bearing down on you.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

You can vaguely make out the herd. Long-necked dinosaurs. Big. Huge tails. Taller than elephants or giraffes. Heads on the same level as the treetops.

"Why are they running?" you demand.

<A T-rex!> Tobias yells. <Heading this way!>

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOMBOOMBOOM!

The dinos are closing in. Closer, closer.

It's hide or get stomped.

But you can't hide until you get small. And you *aren't* getting small!

Your body is segmenting. A hard shell forms over your human arms and legs, over your face. But you don't shrink. You're a four-foot-something half-roach half-human.

And here come the big boys!

<Run!> Tobias yells.

You try, and stumble. Your legs are fusing together, turning into a bloated roach abdomen.

The thunder grows louder. Surrounds you. A whale-size dino passes by you, blocking out the moon. The herd is all around you.

You're trapped!

An enormous talon passes right over your head. The dinosaurs are moving around you like water moves around a rock in a stream.

All you can do is stand still and tremble.

Get small, you tell yourself. *GET SMALL.*

You begin to shrink.

You're a dog-size roach. A cat-size roach. And then —

Another talon coming down toward your head.

Uh-oh.

You're a dead roach.

Bad choice. You didn't have time to morph. Go back to page 84 and choose again.

CHAPTER 22

You run.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Jake is right in front of you. Ax in front of him.

The others are behind you somewhere. *I'm glad my legs aren't as short as Marco's, you think.*

You can hear the dinosaurs closing in.

Boom! Boom! Boom! A sound like rolling thunder. Like a train bearing down on you.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Here and there, you catch a fleeting glimpse of the herd. Long necks. Huge tails. Big and heavy enough to smash you like a steamroller.

Your leg muscles burn. Your lungs ache. But you push yourself harder. Fueled by fear.

<A T-rex!> Tobias yells. <Heading this way!>
BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOMBOOMBOOM!

Closer, closer. The thunder grows louder. Surrounds you. The herd is all around you.

You try to run with it. But the long-necked dinosaurs are faster. And they're also fueled by panic.

WHAMMMM!

The ground bounces, stumbling you to your knees.

"ScreeeeeEEEEEE!" a long-necked dinosaur squeals in panic.

A shadow that blots out the moon and stars. Trembling, you turn and look. Then —

CHOMP!

"Agggghhhh!" you scream.

Darkness. Hot breath. A slimy, rough surface beneath you. A tongue!

You're in T-rex's mouth!

GULP!

Pressure on all sides. Squeezing you down and down some nightmare tunnel.

You're being swallowed!

A bigger opening. Liquid all around. Water. No, no, no. Too hot to be water. Digestive acid.

You're being digested.

You are blind. Deaf, except for a sound of

churning. And the steady bass drum of a heart beating.

You grind up against warm flesh, up against something that feels like bones. T-rex's last snack?

You're holding your breath. You don't want to breathe in the battery acid T-rex has in its stomach.

What can you do?

With a desperate burst of energy, you try to claw your way out. But it's hopeless. You can't grab onto the smooth flesh lining the dinosaur's belly.

What can you do?

The Ellimist has given you only one morph: roach.

You begin to morph.

Almost immediately your oxygen-deprived brain calms down. Your thinking grows clearer. Roach bodies can live longer than humans without much air.

You're growing smaller. Now the churning of the stomach isn't so painful.

You're alive. But for how long?

You pass out. Wake up. Pass out.

When you wake up the second time you notice the stomach has stopped churning. Your roach senses can smell fresh air.

You force the roach toward the air.

Run!

Up a tube the size of a water pipe.

Run!

Out into a cavern lined with sparkling teeth.

Run!

Across a plain of pink flesh.

CHAPTER 23

You begin to demorph.

Your human eyesight blinks back on. You can see you're standing next to an enormous corpse. You're still only a few inches high. A dinosaur looks the size of an aircraft carrier.

The others notice you.

"Hey!" Cassie says. "You're alive!"

<Barely,> you say, still more roach than human.

"We all made it," Jake says, shaking his head. "Amazing."

"Who killed the T-rex?" you ask.

"I guess I did," Jake says.

"How?"

"It ate me," Jake says. "So I acquired it and started morphing in its throat."

Everyone is buzzed with energy and nerves. You decide to keep walking even though it's dark. You trudge through the grass for a few miles. You stop and doze. You get up and trudge some more.

Nobody knows where you're going. But somehow walking makes you feel better.

Gradually the sky lightens and the sun comes up. More trudging. And now you're beginning to think that sitting down and never walking again would be a nice plan.

"Oh, man, look," Jake says. "I think we're coming up on some kind of big gorge or whatever."

You march up to it. A huge canyon. You're on the edge of a valley hundreds of feet deep and miles across.

The valley isn't empty. Down there, spread across a mile of valley floor, are glittering, shining buildings. And hovering over them is something that looks like a flying saucer.

A flying saucer and dinos? This is getting weird. If you decide to pretend you never saw that city, go to chapter 24. If you decide to investigate, go to chapter 25.

CHAPTER 24

You turn your back on the canyon and walk the way you came. Through the tall grass, heading for the forest.

You're hungry. Thirsty. Itchy. Damp from sweating in the heavy humidity.

An added plus: You're attracting bugs the size of small birds.

At first you complain about the bugs, the humidity. But after a while the group quiets down. Everyone seems to be fighting depression. You have no idea where you're going or how to get home.

Even Tobias seems tired. You notice he is flapping from tree to tree, resting while the rest of your weird little group catches up.

Once you've crossed the plain, you move into the woods. You stop to drink from a spring.

"I wish I had a Coke," Jake says as he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Anything in the soda family," Marco says. "Coke, Pepsi, Sprite, Orangina, root beer. Hey, I'd even suck down a Tab."

Ax has one hoof in the edge of the stream. <I find the water in this time period quite refreshing. Far superior to twenty-first-century water.>

"I want a shower," Rachel says.

"Why?" Cassie asks. "You already look impossibly clean and well groomed. I swear you have some sort of force field that repels dirt."

<Shhh . . .> Tobias says.

"Why?" Marco says. "I like to bond by sharing grooming tips. Have I ever told you how I keep my hair so soft and shiny?"

<I think I hear something.>

Jake instantly looks alert. "Check it out."

"You *think*?" you repeat. Birds of prey have incredibly sharp hearing. You don't understand Tobias's hesitation.

Tobias flaps hard, straining for attitude. <Uh-oh. A Deinonychus. Only about four feet to your left.>

You spin. Scan the trees. Tobias knows a lot more about dinosaurs than you do and he sounds worried.

"I don't see anything," Jake says.

Rachel is already starting to morph. She's growing, sprouting grizzly fur. "What's a Deinonychus?"

"Aren't those the baddies from *Jurassic Park*?" you ask.

"Those were Velociraptors," Marco says.

"What's the difference?" Cassie asks.

<Deinonychus are bigger,> Tobias says, sounding puzzled. <It's weird. Paleontologists say Deinonychus was a smart pack-hunter. But this one is alone.>

"Maybe it's an outcast," Rachel suggests. "Like a lone wolf."

You have another idea. "Or —"

"Heeeeeesssss!"

Coming from your left.

"Heeeeeesssss!"

Coming from your right!

You spin around just in time to see a flash of motion. A man-size dinosaur. Leaping. Then —
BAM!

Sharp talons hit your chest, knocking you onto your back. You're pinned to the ground!

You beat on its pebbly flesh with your bare hands.

The dinosaur lifts one talon. It points a wicked, down-curved claw at your guts.

"No!" you yell.

SLASH!

You're lunch for a Deinonychus. Go back to page 93 and choose again.

CHAPTER 25

"We've got to get down there somehow," you say. "Investigate. Maybe whoever built that city can help us figure out a way home."

FLASH!

The valley disappears.

The prehistoric landscape vanishes.

You and the others are sitting in the middle of an empty IMAX theater. You have the best seat in the house. Center seat of the center row.

Cassie, Ax, and Tobias are on your right.

Marco, Rachel, and Jake are on your left.

A tub of buttered popcorn sits on your lap. There's a supersize soda in the cup holder.

Marco picks up his cup. Sips.

"Coke?" you ask.

Marco makes a face. "Tab."

INVESTIGATE, comes the Ellimist's booming voice. FIND A WAY. THESE ARE THINGS HUMANS DO WELL.

The houselights dim.

The enormous curved screen in front of you fills with an image. A close-up of a nameless primitive man. His grubby hands are rubbing two sticks together. A lick of flame starts to grow, illuminating a face filled with wonder and fear.

The scene shifts. You see a dirty, wild-looking woman tap-tapping a piece of flint against a stone to fashion a crude tool.

Again the scene shifts. You see men and women of all races weaving fabric, forging glittery objects of metal, collecting seeds, planting seeds, making sails and canoes and setting off to explore waterways.

Now the pace of the images picks up. More toolmakers. This time fashioning spears, harpoons, and arrows. Wheels! Wheels of a dozen different sizes. Wheels on crude vehicles, on potter's wheels, on lathes.

And now the humans you see are starting to look different. More light in their eyes. A keener awareness. You watch them plot the motion of the stars. Create the first irrigation systems.

Stack up crude bricks to build shelters and then ziggurats and then pyramids.

People wearing tunics and sandals invent screws, pulleys, levers. Pumps, simple engines, watermills, plows. Arches, vaults, domes. Amphitheaters, aqueducts, tunnels, bridges. Lighthouses, roads, and compasses.

Now the images are coming faster. Castles. Gunpowder. Cannons. Maps. Clocks. Ink, paper, movable type, printing presses and books. Telescopes. Steam engines.

<Incredible,> Ax whispers.

Now the images are spinning so fast they are just flashes.

You see what has to be Benjamin Franklin with his kite. Edison with a bumpy-looking lightbulb. Then a sprawling city lighting up. New York!

Streams of people in hats moving down a staircase and onto a herky-jerky train. A subway in London or Boston or Paris. Delicate suspension bridges. Trains, photographs, telephones. People climbing snowy mountain peaks, probing ocean floors, riding into space on rockets.

Images flashing by, blurring into one another. Airplanes, elevators, skyscrapers, cars, computers, plastics, drugs, medicine, TVs, lasers, robots, vaccines, satellites.

The screen goes dark.

The theater lights come up.

<That was cool,> Tobias says.

"Very PBS," Marco adds.

"What does it mean?" you ask.

YOU HAVE PASSED THE TEST.

The theater disappears.

The Animorphs disappear.

You're in the backseat of your parents' car. Your dad is driving and your mother is in the passenger seat. You're following a big yellow moving truck. On the way to your new house.

"Mom?" you say in disbelief.

You remember everything — the battle in your bedroom, morphing, the Howlers, the T-rex. You also remember this car ride. It happened a week ago. Back before you ever spent a minute in your new school.

Your mother turns around and smiles at you. "What is it, sweetie?"

"Nothing."

You feel like crying. You have it to do all over. Now you don't ever have to go near that construction site. Now you don't ever have to discover the blue box.

Unless you want to.

CHAPTER 26

You roll. Stumble to your feet.
RUN!

You focus some small part of your brain on morphing. Imagine yourself as a sleek gray wolf running through the woods.

As you run on your slow human legs, you feel the changes begin. Your jaw stretching outward. Your bones grinding as your weak human mouth becomes the crushing jaw of the wolf.

Down comes the massive dinosaur head, teeth flashing, drool dripping. You can see one huge yellow eye marking you.

Instinctively, you dodge behind a tree. Make a quick turn.

CHOMP!

The T-rex closes its jaws shut on a tree inches to your left. A piece of bark flies into your cheek.

“HrrrrrRRROOOOAAAARRRR!” the T-rex screams with rage.

<Go eat something else!> you beg.

You’re running full out, knowing it’s hopeless, but needing to put as much distance as possible between you and that jaw.

SPLING! SPLING!

Your knees change direction mid-stride! You stumble. Your arms are growing, getting stronger, your shoulders broadening.

You put your hands on the ground. Your hands are still human, but you try running on all fours. Your wolf legs are only half-formed, but you are already faster.

You dodge through the trees, feeling more at home in the forest. Rough pads are growing on your feet, making it easier to run.

Then the wolf senses blink on.

The wolf’s ears hear everything. They hear huge insects scurrying under damp leaves. They hear your friends crashing through the woods a hundred yards ahead of you. They hear Marco crying in panic. And they hear the footfalls of the T-rex.

WHAM! WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!

Directly behind you.

Your human mind was afraid.

The wolf mind is terrified.

A strange whining yelp escapes from your lips. "UrrrUrrrUrrr . . ."

WHAMWHAMWHAMWHAM!

RUN!

You are all wolf now. Wolves can move. Especially scared wolves. You are going so fast the ground under your paws is a blur.

Then —

"HrrrrrRRROOOOAAAARRRR!"

CHOMP!

You feel a flash of pain and then —

Nothing.

Bad morph choice. Wolves can run fast. But not as fast as T-rex. Go back to page 75 and try again.

Don't miss

ANIMORPHS[®]

41 The Familiar

DEE-DEET! DE-DEET!

The alarm was like a jackhammer to the head. I groaned.

DE-DEET!

Enough, already! I felt for the clock radio. The snooze button. Just five more minutes.

My hand patted the air vainly. No bedside table? I lifted my lids. Where was my . . .

My heart stopped.

I was staring into a triangular screen. A flat computer panel mounted flush in a peeling, white plaster wall across from the bed. Eerie copper letters pulsed at the top of the glowing gray screen. 5:58:16 A.M. Below the time flashed the words "TO DO" and a single entry: "Report to work."

This was not my room. Not even close.

DE-DEET! DE-DEET!

My body stiffened to warrior mode and I bolted out of bed.

The alarm broke off.

My mind, forced back into consciousness by the shock, hurled me orders. "Get out!" it warned. "Get out, get out, get out!"

I raced to a tall black panel in the wall. A door. Had to be.

Get out!

I tried, but there was no handle. No release lever. Nothing.

I struck it.

"You are not prepared to leave for work!" said a shrill computer voice.

I pounded even harder. Hammered the panel with a clenched fist. A fist that . . .

I stopped suddenly as I studied my fist.

It was big.

I mean it was rough and callused and had veins that pumped across the hairy, muscular forearm like I belonged to Powerhouse Gym and actually used my membership.

It was the arm of a grown man.

My heart started up again, pumping now at record speed.

I probed the polished steel door frame for my reflection, for the face I knew.

And yes, there! I saw my eyes, dark as midnight. My strong, broad face. My . . .

I swallowed hard.

My short-cropped hair? My six-foot frame?

My day-old beard?

I brought a hand to my face. My fingers scraped across my chin. Stubble like sixty-grit sandpaper. I needed a shave.

My breath got choppy. My head felt about ready to explode.

The Jake staring back at me was an adult! Not crazy old. But out of college a few years. At least ten years older than the kid I'd been the night before.

What was going on? Where were the others? How did I get to this place?

I was gonna have a heart attack if I didn't calm down. I stumbled back to bed and sat down on the narrow strip no wider than a torso. A pad on a metal plate.

"Okay," I said out loud. "Okay." Use your brain. Cover the possible explanations.

An Ellimist trick? Yeah, it had to be. But why hadn't he spoken?

A Yeerk experiment, maybe? Could I have been captured?

It's hard to think straight when you wake up like Tom Hanks in that movie *Big*. At least he woke up in his own room, in his own clothes. Sort of. I was wearing this weird, faded orange jumpsuit, the color of a sun-bleached Orioles cap.

I fingered the suit, and then it hit me.

Of course!

I knew what was going on here. It had finally happened.

I knew it was only a matter of time, what with the pressures of leadership, the violent battle, the endless fights against a strengthening enemy.

I'd finally been driven to a complete psychotic breakdown.

And this was my padded cell.

Don't miss



Back to Before

My name is Jake.

I live in a normal American city, in a normal American state.

I love my mom and my dad. I even love my big brother, Tom. I like basketball and hate math and get a little down when it rains for more than one day. I think those little Audi TT's are cool but if I had the money, and was old enough, I'd probably drive a Jeep.

I live on burgers and fries and have never voluntarily consumed a brussels sprout.

My room is a mess. My homework is late. My class notes are so disorganized they cannot be read by anyone except Marco, who has been living off my notes for five years or more, and sometimes has to interpret them for me.

I cried the day Michael Jordan retired. And I can still tell you what time it was, what day, week, month, hour, minute, and second, what I

was wearing and what I was eating when Mark McGwire banged his record homer.

I'm a kid. A kid with a dog and parents and teachers and friends. Just a kid.

I have these nightmares. Sometimes I'm a termite, trapped inside a piece of wood, can't get out and the clock is ticking, ticktock, ticktock, can't escape, wooden walls and blackness all around me, pressing me tight.

Sometimes I'm falling. Flying and my wings just aren't there and I'm a mile up in the sky, falling, and thinking, *I can't fly! I can't fly!*

Sometimes still, even now, I see the dark red eye of Crayak and feel his malice reaching for me all across the millions of light-years.

But the worst dream is just me and Cassie. And we're standing in the forest somewhere. She's outlined in light. You know, like there's a bright light hidden behind her. And it's almost like she's shining. And there's this cave. And I'm telling her to go in, and she's looking at me with trust in her eyes, looking at me and loving me and believing in me and trusting me and I'm telling her to go into the cave.

I'm the leader of the Animorphs. I don't know how that happened. It was some doom pronounced by Marco. Why me? Because, Marco said. Because it has to be.

We were five kids taking a shortcut home from

the mall at night. There was a ship. There was an alien. There was the destructive worm of knowledge: You are not alone. You are not safe. Nothing is what it seems. No one is who they seem to be.

The knowledge of betrayal and terror. The awareness of evil.

And then, the power.

The power made us responsible, see. Without the power the knowledge would have just been a worm of fear eating up our insides.

Bad enough. But it was the power that turned fear into obligation, that laid the weight on our unready shoulders.

We could become any animal we touched, the Andalite told us.

Power enough to win? No. Power enough to fight? Ah, yes. Just enough, little Jake, here is just enough power to imprison you in a cage of duty, to make you fight.

"Help me. I'm cold."

Another battle. Another horror.

Couldn't anything make it end? Was there no way out? Was I trapped, fighting, fighting till one by one my friends died or went nuts?

I lay on my bed. Stared up at the ceiling.

"Help me. Please. I'm cold."

Into the cave, Cassie.

All for what? For nothing. To delay the Yeerks, but never to win. And someday, to lose.

Was there no way out?

"There's always a way out, Jake the Mighty," a voice said. "My lord Crayak holds out his omnipotent hand to you, Jake the Yeerk Killer. Jake the Ellimist's tool."

I sat up. I knew the voice.

The Drode stood by my desk. It wasn't large. It perched forward like one of those small dinosaurs. It had mean, smart eyes in a humanoid head. It was wrinkled, dark green or purple maybe. So dark it was almost black. The mocking mouth was lined with green.

The Drode was Crayak's creature, his emissary, his tool. Crayak was . . . Crayak was evil. A power so vast, so complete that only the Ellimist could keep him in check. A balance of terror: evil and good checking each other, limiting each other, making deals that affected the survival of entire solar systems.

"Go away," I said to the Drode.

"But you called me."

"Go back to Crayak. Leave me alone."

The Drode smiled. He got up and moved closer. Closer till his face was only inches from my own.

"There *is* a way out," the Drode whispered. "Say the word and it never was, Jake. Say the word, Jake, and you never walked through the

construction site. Say the word and you know nothing. No weight on your shoulders. Say the word."

"Go away," I said through gritted teeth.

"How long till your cousin Rachel loses her grip? You know the darkness is growing inside her. How long till Tobias dies, a bird, a *bird*! How can he ever be happy? How long till Marco is forced to destroy his own Controller mother? Will he survive that, do you think? How long, Jake, till you kill Tom? Then what dreams will come, Jake the Yeerk Killer?"

"Get out of here. Crawl back under your rock."

"It will happen, Jake. You know that. The cave. The day will come. You know what the cave is, Jake. You know what it means, that dark cave. You know that death is within. When she dies, when Cassie dies, it will be at your word, Jake."

I covered my face with my hands.

"My master Crayak offers you an escape. In his compassion Great Crayak has struck a deal with that meddling nitwit Ellimist. Crayak would free you, Jake. Crayak would free you all. All will be as it would have been if you had simply taken a different path home."

I saw that moment again. At the mall. Deciding whether to take the safe, well-lit, sensible

way home. Or the route that would take us through the construction site, and to a meeting that would change everything.

Undo it. Undo it all. No more war. No more pain and fear and guilt?

"Just one word, Jake," the Drode whispered. "No . . . no, *two*, I think. One must not sacrifice good manners. Two words and it never was. Two words and you know nothing, have no power, no responsibility."

"What words?"

"One is Crayak. The other is *please*."

I wanted to say no.

I wanted to say no . . .

I wanted . . .

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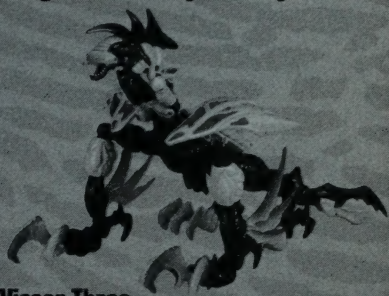
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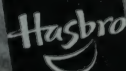


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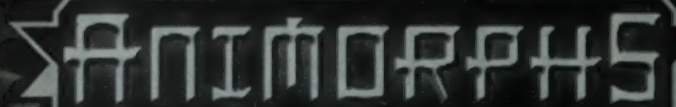
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We can't tell you who we are. Or where we live. It's too risky, and we've got to be careful. Really careful. So we don't trust anyone. Because if they find us . . . well, we just won't let them find us.

The thing you should know is that everyone is in really big trouble. Yeah. Even you.

It's time for our next mission and it's up to you to decide whether you want to join us. You probably already realize that each mission—each battle—could mean infestation, or worse. You probably already realize that we win about as many as we lose. But we are managing to hold the Yeerks back, and one more person could make all the difference.

Just so you know, there are going to be a lot of decisions to make. The right answers keep us alive. The wrong ones—well that's pretty obvious. So what do you think?

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